

Role of Evaluation in Public Policy

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Presentation to Conference

***'Evaluation of EU Structural Funds:
Reinforcing Quality and Utilisation'***

Vilnius, Lithuania March 2009

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In this conference we are concerned with the evaluation of 'public policy' – without ever drawing the boundaries, defining the scope of what public policy means.....

I want to talk about the changing nature of public policy, what implications this has for evaluation and more particularly what are the implications for the theme of this session: 'embedding evaluation in wider government'

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I am also implicitly setting my argument into a changing profile of evaluation as a practice. The simple distinctions of the 1980s – of ex ante and ex post, of summative and formative evaluation has become much more differentiated. Evaluation today has many more purposes – not only accountability and learning, but also better policy planning, improved implementation, empowerment of those without voice and even explanatory studies that are close to fundamental research and knowledge production

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This is partly in response to the changing nature of public policy – and makes it especially important that we analyse and understand the policy context in which evaluation operates

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I want to define 'public policy' in three ways:

- **As policy making, i.e. the way public policy is made**
- **As public management, i.e. the way we go about managing ministries and agencies operating in the public sphere**
- **As policy content, i.e. what public action tries to achieve**

.....they are all closely connected

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Our understanding (if not the avowed model) of policy-making has changed over the last 20 years – a linear top-down framework has given way to to an iterative, collaborative and even bottom-up framework

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The two contending frameworks come mainly from political science and policy analysis:

- **The ‘rational’ top down perspective (follows Lasswell and Palumbo)**
 - **The ‘political’ bottom up perspective (follows Lindblohm and Sabbatier)**

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The 'rational' or linear framework follows a number of stages:

- It begins with problem identification by policy makers, leads on to the identification of alternative solutions, which is followed by assessment and choice among alternatives and the implementation of selected options- which are then evaluated.**

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The 'political' framework is iterative rather than linear and assumes that:

- **Policy- making is a political activity depending on different interest and values**
- **Citizens and interest groups make demands which policy makers respond to by mobilising support and building coalitions**
- **The basis for political action is debate, conflict and consensus building**

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The *rational* framework assumes that policy makers have access to sufficient information, can decide, know what they want, can achieve it and that implementation is administratively unproblematic

The *political* framework assumes that the policy system is full of compromise, information is often lacking, many things cannot be decided on, objectives are conflicted and implementation is indeed part of policy making!

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Critics of the rational framework argue that:

- **Hierarchical control is imperfect – there is significant discretion at all policy levels**
- **Information is imperfect, making measurement of outcomes difficult**
- **Frequently problems & objectives are not clearly defined – there is no consensus**
 - **Differences in ‘local’ context make uniform implementation impractical**
- **Actors outside of bureaucracies have a strategic input, including for example, civil society, networks of experts and the private sector**
- **There is often resistance to implementation and continued attempts at political re-definition and re-negotiation – policy is not linear**

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Changes in the policy-making correlates with the evolution of public management paradigms. The rise of the 'New' Public Management has been associated with :

- **Decentralisation and 'marketisation'**
- **An emphasis on looking outwards rather than inwards**
- **Concern for risks, political legitimacy and trust**
- **Multiple actors and partnerships – including civil society – involved in policy processes**
- **Multi-level governance within states and across borders as in the EU**
- **Globalisation bringing with it permeable borders and many more 'exogenous' factors**

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As a result policy now often works through ‘new policy instruments’ that involve:

- **Negotiation, consensus building, coalition-building**
 - **Regulation and new regulatory frameworks**
- **Governments as facilitators and ‘orchestrators’**
 - **Coordination between public agencies and governments – in partnerships & consortia**
- **Peer-review and the exchange of good practice**

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We see a shift across OECD countries towards 'soft law' (OMC-like) and semi-formal coordination rather than conventional regulation and legislation

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This is partly because the goals of public policy are also changing:

- **Focus now on complex & 'chronic' problems – rather than on service delivery**
 - **Needs active involvement of actors and citizens**
 - **Tries to be transversal and 'joined-up' – multiple interventions simultaneously applied**
 - **Aims for behavioural & cultural change**
 - **Can only be realised in the long term**

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The problem is that not all policies and public management arrangements change in the same way or at the same time!

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Different policy scenarios now co-exist

- **A decision-making, linear, top-down, service provision scenario**
- **An iterative, negotiated but still mainly government orchestrated scenario**
- **A self-regulated, 'steered' through stakeholders & intermediaries scenario**
- **An exploratory, deliberative, consensus building and policy development scenario**

Evaluators are far better towards the top of this list!

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Evaluators often face:

- **Multi actor delivery through partnerships and multilevel governance – implementation is context specific and generalisation across contexts is difficult**
- **Policies may have conflicting or changing objectives or be pursued in inconsistent ways (for example under resourced) such that ‘success’ may be hard to measure**
- **Selecting policy instruments in order to be confident about what works is risky – do we know enough?**
- **Information and indicators may be difficult to collect**
- **It can be problematic to attribute success or failure to policy interventions because of the many exogenous factors**

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Evaluators are expected to:

- **Engage with partners and stakeholders with different interests**
- **Span international, national, regional and municipal tiers of government**
 - **Speak to civil society and communities – participatory studies within an extended notion of governance**
 - **Contribute to risk management and learning – ideally ‘calibrate the future’**
 - **Try to produce generalised knowledge across diverse contexts**
- **Contribute ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ – to policy design and to improving implementation**

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What does all of this mean for strategies for 'embedding evaluation in wider government'?

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It has implications for:

- **The boundaries of what we mean by public policy**

And for

- **The quality and content of what we mean by
'embedding'**

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Evaluation has to be embedded in a policy system that is wider than one government ministry (such as a Ministry of Finance), or one set of policies (such as the Structural Funds) and encompass partners, including civil society, the private sector, professional groups, experts and often citizens – all of whom have to internalise evaluation cultures and understandings

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All of which has consequences for the quality of interactions. Yesterday we spoke of evaluation partnerships, community of practice networks and involving citizens and interest groups in evaluation use.....

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In relation to utilisation and dissemination of evaluation we heard yesterday of a shift:

From 'confidential' evaluation reports to>>>>>

'Available' reports to >>>>>

'Active dissemination strategies' to >>>>>

'Dialogue' and the 'Involvement' of partners

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Reprise

Evaluation is itself embedded in a changing and more complex and multi-partner public policy system. It is a system in which policy making, policy content and public management have been transformed in many countries and this is likely to continue.

We should remember this when we try to embed evaluation in 'wider government'

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